

Jesus' Baptism
Matt. 3:13-17
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I mentioned a few weeks ago that the story of Jesus getting separated from his parents and being found a day later in the Temple is the only story we have in the gospels in between Jesus' birth and his baptism around age 30. We are left to wonder and imagine what Jesus must have been like growing up: learning to walk (maybe across his bathtub), saying his first words, throwing his first tantrum, going to his first day of school (how would you like to be HIS teacher?), getting his first job. What was Jesus like during those years? We don't know.

In contrast, we know all about his baptism. It is one of the few stories that is mentioned in all four gospels, which tells us something about how important it is. John the Baptist prepares the way for Jesus, letting the crowds know that there is someone very special coming who will do great things, someone John calls "the lamb of God." Then Jesus comes from Galilee to the Jordan River and is baptized.

When I was young, we lived in Jeffersonville, Indiana, which is a town on the banks of the Ohio River, across from Louisville, Kentucky. One of my favorite memories is going down to the Ohio to watch the Great Steamboat Race during the Kentucky Derby Festival. Two enormous paddleboats – The Belle of Louisville and the Delta Queen – would race from the Kennedy Bridge, down around Six-Mile Island, and back again. As a kid, it was a thrilling race, and we would sit on the banks of the river for three hours watching it play out. In hindsight, steamboats don't really move all that fast, so it must have been about the most boring event ever for my parents.

But one of the things I remember more than the boats was the river itself. The Ohio River was not a pretty sight. It was perpetually brown and had all kinds of debris floating in it. Plus it stunk. I remember once my great-uncle tried to impress me by telling me he once saw across it, and I said, "Eww! Why?"

"Why?" may also be an appropriate question for us to ask Jesus in this story. In fact, people have been asking that for centuries, not because the Jordan stunk – although it probably did – but because they don't understand why Jesus, of all people, was baptized. If our understanding of baptism is that it cleanses us of our sins, and the essence of Jesus' humanity was his sinlessness, then why did he need to be baptized?

Because there's so little we know about Jesus at this point in his life it's hard to answer that question, but I would like to pose a theory and see what you think. In our denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), we don't talk a lot about sacraments. That's a term usually reserved for the Catholic church, which has seven sacraments: baptism, communion, confirmation, marriage, reconciliation (which includes confession), holy orders (which is like ordination), and anointing of the sick.

In our denomination, we recognize only two sacraments: communion and baptism. And we understand a sacrament to be an outward expression of an inward belief. So, when we come to the communion table, we are simply taking what we believe inwardly (our faith in Christ as our savior) and expressing it outwardly by taking the bread and the cup.

Same thing with baptism. We are taking an inward belief (a desire to commit our lives to Jesus Christ) and expressing it outwardly by being baptized. In a sense, baptism is confirmation of our inward belief, that we are God's children.

So I wonder, by being baptized, if Jesus wasn't doing the same thing. I believe he was simply expressing outwardly and publicly what he already knew inside, that he was the son of God. Not only does his baptism make a public statement about how important it is to be baptized, but it confirms who he is and what he is called to do.

There are two things that really seal the deal about Jesus identity. The first is the descending of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. When I perform a baptism, I always say, "I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." Notice that this is one of the few passages in the Bible where all three members of the Trinity are present: Jesus is baptized, the Holy Spirit descends, and God speaks.

The words spoken here are very in the second confirmation of Jesus' identity, and would have carried a lot of meaning for the original hearers. The statement is actually a two-parter, both of which are rooted in scripture. The first part, "This is my son, whom I love" comes from Psalm 2, which was often read at the coronation for a king. Verse 7 of that Psalm says, "I will proclaim the decree of the Lord. He said to me, 'You are my son; today I have become your father.'"

The second part of the statement, "with him I am well pleased," is a direct reference to Isaiah 42, a chapter that describes what's known as the suffering servant. Isaiah describes how God will send someone who will rescue the Israelites from their plight by suffering in their place. The first two verses of that chapter say, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold; my chosen one in whom I delight. I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations."

What is happening here is more than a statement of identity. It's a statement of adoption and a calling. In essence, God is saying, "Here's who you are, and here's what I want you to do," and He gives Jesus the Holy Spirit to accomplish that. This story marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry, which as we know ends at the cross.

One of the most memorable baptisteries I've ever seen is in the church where I served in seminary. It's set in a little alcove outside the sanctuary, and is remarkable in its simplicity. But my favorite feature can only be seen from down in the baptistery. If you stand there and look straight up, there's a beautiful silver dove hanging down. It's the first thing a newly baptized person sees when they emerge from the waters.

It's a reminder that the words spoken to Jesus at his baptism were also spoken to us at ours. When we were baptized, we were welcomed into God's family. We were adopted by God as His child. In this sense water is thicker than blood, because while our human family is flawed and can cause pain and disappoint, God our parent will never leave us or stop loving us.

Not only are we adopted, we are called. We come up out of those waters a new person with a new purpose. The old sinful self is washed away; if we could actually see it, it would probably made the baptismal water look like the Ohio River, all brown and stinky. We are made clean and anointed to serve. Just as Jesus is called forward from his baptism to serve, so are we, to open ourselves to be used by God to further the work of his kingdom. At baptism, we are made new, and that fact should influence every thought and decision in our life. As Martin Luther said, "Remember your baptism, and be glad."

I know what you may be thinking: “But Kory, I was baptized as an infant!” Yeah, me too. But that doesn’t change the fact that we were baptized, does it? It simply means that while we can’t remember the actual act, we can remember the meaning behind it, especially when we hear the story of Jesus’ baptism or witness someone else’s. And if you haven’t been baptized...well, let’s talk! You have something to which you can look forward.

In the Disciples tradition, we practice what’s called believer’s baptism by full immersion, which basically means we hold people under water until they give their life to Christ. OK, first they make the decision, and then we immerse them in the water. We don’t practice infant baptism (although we accept it) because we believe people should make a conscious choice to be baptized. The typical age of people getting baptized is around 12 or 13, and is usually preceded by some sort of discipleship class, which helps the young people get grounded in the basics of Christian faith. The class, which starts in a few weeks, culminates in the baptism of the students and their joining of the church.

I think this is a great way to lead into baptisms, but here’s what we have to all be careful of. Baptism does not mark the end of something; as with Jesus, it marks the beginning of something. Another way to say this is that baptism is not the destination, but the first step of the journey, a journey with God through your life and faith. If we are baptized, and then we live in such a way that doesn’t demonstrate that we’ve been fundamentally transformed by the grace of God, we’re committing the ultimate offense against God: we’re ignoring Him.

Through baptism, we are welcomed as a child of God and take our place with Jesus in the family portrait of faith. Then, we are called to live out the belief we have just sacramentalized through baptism. As he has so many other times, Jesus has led the way, and calls us to follow him. We are God’s children, whom God loves. My prayer is that as we live out our faith, we will hear God’s voice say, “With you I am well pleased.” You are a child of God. Remember your baptism, and be glad.